

School Redesign Network

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A PROPOSAL TO DEVELOP AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE CASHEE EXAMINATIONS

In considering the development of an alternative assessment to the CASHEE examination two sources of data has had a considerable influence on my thinking on this issue (1) the recent HumRRO report on the impact of CASHEE and the national standards for Educational and Psychological Testing. HumRRO, reported that nearly 100,000 students in the Class of 2006—22% of the graduating class—have been unable to pass the CAHSEE and will be denied a high school diploma if they cannot pass the exam this year, even if they have passed all of their classes¹

Of great concern is the disproportionate impact of the exit exam requirement on students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities, all of whom are far more likely not to have passed the CAHSEE. Almost half of English learners (49%), nearly two-thirds of special education students (65%), 37% of African-American students, 32% of Latino students, and 34% of low-income students have not passed the CAHSEE, in comparison to just 10% of White students and 11% of Asian students.²

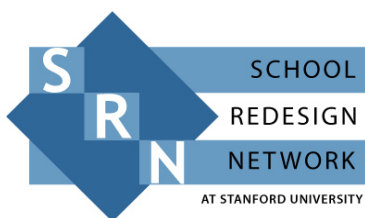
The consequences of being denied a high school diploma are severe. Students without diplomas are 75% more likely to be unemployed and are estimated to have 30% lower lifetime earnings than students with diplomas.³ Research indicates that the 66,657 students that the State reported as dropouts from its public schools in 2002–03 will cost the State \$14 billion in lost wages.

As we consider options for students who have not yet passed the CAHSEE, it is important to note that California's existing policy does not satisfy standards for fair and

¹ *Independent Evaluation of the California High School Exit Examination: 2005 Evaluation Report*, Human Resources Research Organization (Sept. 30, 2005) at ix, available at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/hs/year6indepeval.asp> (hereinafter "The HumRRO Report"). See also John Rogers, Jennifer Jellison Holme, and David Silver, *More Questions Than Answers: CAHSEE Results, Opportunity to Learn, & the Class of 2006*, UCLA Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (August 23, 2005), available at <http://www.idea.gseis.ucla.edu/resources/exitexam/index.html> (finding similar results).

² The HumRRO Report at ____.

³ Rogers, Holme & Silver at 1.



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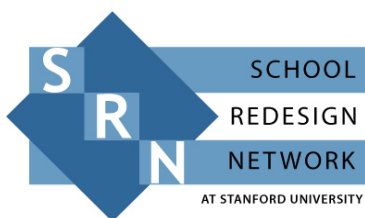
valid assessment outlined in the Standard for Educational and Psychological Testing and summarized by the National Academy of Sciences. According to the National Academy, any high stakes educational decision “should not be made solely or automatically on the basis of a single test score. Other relevant information about the student's knowledge and skills should also be taken into account.” Current policy calls for students to be denied a diploma solely on the basis of their score on the CAHSEE without considering other information about students’ knowledge and skills. California is virtually alone among the 50 states in adopting a single test for high school graduation without exemptions or alternatives.

The Academy’s Board on Testing and Assessment also notes that an assessment should be able to determine “whether a students’ performance on a test reflects knowledge and skill based on appropriate instruction or is attributable to poor instruction or to such factors as language barriers or disabilities unrelated to the skills being tested.” Valid inferences are undermined by the use of a single test not constructed to measure the learning of English language learners or students with disabilities. Finally, since California does not monitor whether students have had actual classroom access to degrees of standards-based instruction, it is currently impossible to make a determination of whether students have received appropriate instruction.

A number of alternatives have been adopted by states as means for students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in addition to the use of a high school exit examination. These include a range of alternative assessments for students with disabilities and English language learners, as well as alternative measures for all students, such as:

- Alternative tests (college entry examinations, AP tests, military entrance examinations, and tests offered in students’ native languages)
- Coursework that reflects state learning standards, at specific levels of achievement,
- End of course examinations aligned to content standards
- Senior exhibitions
- Locally developed performance assessments, including portfolios, senior projects, student work samples, and performance tasks
- State-developed performance assessments, including performance tasks and student work samples scored using state rubrics.

Each of these strategies has strengths and limitations. Given the goals that California’s



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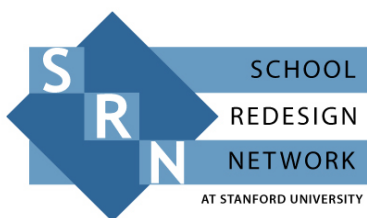
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State Department of Education has expressed for the exit examination in this state, we propose that the state develop, as an alternative for all students who fail the exit exam, a set of performance assessments linked to the state learning standards that can be administered and scored locally using state-established standards. This approach, which has been adopted in Washington, Oregon, and New Jersey, among other states, has the virtue of providing tasks that are comparable and clearly linked to state standards that are also responsive to different learning approaches. New Jersey's strategy is worthy of particular note, as it requires districts to provide remedial coursework as well as performance assessment alternatives to students who fail the exit exam. Thus, the system promotes focused learning opportunities around the standards. The performance tasks clearly reflect the standards, provide multiple ways for students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills, and maintain student effort, engagement, and learning. New Jersey is one of the few exit examination states that has both increased its graduation rates, which are among the highest in the nation, and has high and increasing student achievement in reading and mathematics. Thus, its strategy appears to have both raised standards without pushing students out of school.

Performance tasks that might be used could include a set of discrete tasks representing specific standards as in New Jersey, a more integrated assessment such as a senior project that evaluates multiple standards in one larger task, as in Pennsylvania, or a collection of student work samples developed to demonstrate specific skills and scored using state standards, as in Washington and Oregon. Any of these approaches could be designed to ensure the assessment of equivalent or higher skill levels in standards domains. At the current moment, it may be easiest to imagine the feasibility of implementing the first approach statewide. We recommend that the state immediately examine the development and implementation of a statewide performance assessment alternative, building on the successful experiences of other states. The details of any alternative approach and its technical quality would be a focus of attention for California.

Knowledge about the range of needs of special education students, the requirements of IDEA, testing standards, and the experience of other states also suggest that, while many special needs students will be able to benefit from a well-constructed alternative assessment, additional alternatives for such students are likely to be required in line with their individualized education plans.

For the current year, because of the lateness in the policy cycle for California to consider and construct alternatives, it is likely that a short-term solution to the problems of invalid assessment will be needed for the 2005-06 school year.



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We believe the state should consider, as professional standards suggest, “other relevant information about students’ knowledge and skills”, including students’ passage of the courses required by the state and the additional courses and requirements stipulated by local districts to receive a diploma. The state should allow the granting of a local diploma to those who have fulfilled these requirements, and offer a special state designation on the diploma to students who have also passed the CAHSEE.